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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: CONTROVERSIAL COMMENTARY CALLS FOR LOOSENING LEASH
ON CHINA'S MEDIA

Classified By: Acting Political Section Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

1. (C) A string of recent media pieces calling for a stronger watchdog role for Chinese media, including a daring commentary on the popular Sina.com web portal, has given journalists a dose of much-needed encouragement, even as they acknowledge continuing tight media controls. The first article, published in the Party-run China Youth Daily, focused on problems television news magazines are having airing controversial content, particularly regarding official corruption and crime. Sina's commentary complained about heavy censorship and the weakness of Chinese media's watchdog role. The theme was then picked up by People's Daily and has been welcomed in commentaries on the People's Daily Internet news site and other web forums. While the publication of such frank criticisms is noteworthy, the theme is one that the Party has pushed fairly consistently and the coverage dovetails well with current Party anti-corruption campaigns. This coincidence may create some space for investigative news in the short term, but broadcasting remains China's most tightly controlled news medium and the system of Party controls on the media will not allow for a serious watchdog effect anytime soon. End Summary.

Let the Watchdog Out

2. (C) The most recent poke at China's censors was inspired by a May 17 article in the Party-run China Youth Daily (CYD), which charged that more than half the telecasts produced by one of CCTV's regular news magazine programs, News Probe, have never aired. (Note: Focus and News Probe are investigative news shows on CCTV-1, the Government's flagship channel. They are usually about 13 and 45 minutes long respectively and appear at various times throughout the week, often in the prime time slot directly following the nightly national news broadcast.) Criticism in the CYD article was directed at "morally bankrupt" local officials who try to cover up wrongdoing and dissuade media from investigating local issues. Popular web portal Sina.com ran a commentary article the following day by Henan-based scholar and journalist Zhu Sabei, who used the China Youth Daily piece as a springboard to complain about heavy censorship and what he termed "the weakness of media's supervision of government."

3. (C) Without mentioning names or ranks, Zhu argued

that jittery officials fearful of negative revelations are the main culprits in squelching the unseen shows. He decried the tendency of such officials to "block the information network" to protect their interests. He contended that authorities wrongly believe that scrutiny of the workings of government will harm social stability. On the contrary, exposure of corruption and abuse of power will prompt better public service, he concluded, adding that public criticism is "safe, beneficial and indispensable" for society.

Headlines and Redlines

14. (C) The People's Daily Online news portal followed with a pair of articles on May 31 and June 2 that appeared to acknowledge the legitimacy of calls for an improved media watchdog function and less local interference. The first piece recounted a visit to CCTV by Wu Guangzheng, the Politburo Standing Committee member in charge of discipline inspection. Wu stressed to CCTV news personnel the importance of media supervision in the fight against official corruption. Contacts said they were especially surprised to see the Government mouthpiece People's Daily Online treat the issue again two days later in another opinion piece. The piece characterized media scrutiny of officialdom as integral to "building a harmonious society," a favored current Party slogan.

15. (C) Calls for media oversight of Government conduct are not unusual, said Zhou Qing'an, (protect), a free lance journalist who writes regularly for the Beijing News. Accusations of censorship and cover-up

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by local officials, however, are rarely raised by staid Party outlets and have raised eyebrows and hopes among some journalists and reformers. Li Xiaoping, a producer at CCTV-9, speculated that the People's Daily online piece so strongly supported the media's watchdog role because the Central Government relies on investigative journalism to ratchet up pressure on local officials to clean up their acts, particularly on environment and corruption issues.

16. (C) In this context, Zhou described the Zhu Sabei piece as valuable and important, adding that any Chinese professional journalist who reads the article will be heartened by its persuasiveness and how close it gets to official redlines without crossing them. After more than a year of tight media controls, such a daring piece is welcome, he said. Zhou judged that Zhu would not be criticized by censors in the Propaganda Department for his commentary. Once a writer starts discussing specifics, such as names of officials or particular Government agencies, then he or she can suffer repercussions. That is not the case here. "Zhu never even mentions the Propaganda Department by name, but that is clearly his target," Zhou remarked. He added that at the same time, there is no specific guidance about discussing broad themes, and the media's watchdog role as a public service is fair game.

Tribal Interests

17. (C) At CCTV, Focus and News Probe staff are discouraged by the constraints they face, said Li. A former News Probe producer, Li said her friends still on staff there regularly tell her she is smart for transferring to the English service, about which Propaganda officials are less concerned. Li stated

that for the news magazine shows, the goal is to get on the air as quickly as possible, especially if a program has controversial content, in order to beat the censors. Once the journalists start investigating a story, officials or business people whom the revelations might harm rally their connections with a view to pressuring censors to nix the show. Those without good connections often must appeal straight to the Propaganda Department. Zhou, the free lance journalist, said the hotel near the Propaganda Department office is constantly booked full of people from the Provinces who want to make sure certain sensitive stories never see print or airwaves.

18. (C) One of Li's News Probe shows was squelched a few years ago, she related. She and her staff put together a special about a cigarette factory in northeastern China that was so strapped for cash that it paid its workers partly in packs of cigarettes. News Probe aired a first segment and then prepared to go to the plant for a follow-up a few weeks later. When the production team got to the airport to depart, however, the head of CCTV news told them to turn around and come back to the office. Li surmised that someone with influence had called a Government bigwig to get the journalists to stand down. In that sense, the Zhu article is also about what Li called "tribal interests." That is, local cadres or entrepreneurs using their relationships with top brass in Beijing to press for protection from media exposure. "This happens all the time," Li said.

Comment

19. (C) While the Government's rhetorical endorsement of a role for the press in fighting corruption may create some protection space for some investigative journalism, the recent commentary and calls for a more effective watchdog function will likely go only as far as the Party deems helpful to its cause. Pursue the wrong story or "go too far" and the rug can easily be pulled out from under any author or outlet. The one-year prison sentence for "extortion" recently meted out to Hunan investigative journalist Yang Xiaoqing illustrates the risks reporters continue to face as they investigate official misconduct.

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